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ABSTRACT

Based on 48 years of coaching experience, a midwestern university forensic coach offers the following suggestions for others involved in forensic activities: (1) the teacher must be well prepared; (2) the school system must be supportive of the program; (3) parents and the community should be informed of school activities; (4) the media should publicize such speech activities; (5) colleges and universities should sponsor clinics, festivals, tournaments, and summer programs; and (6) community experts as well as alumni should be invited to be lecturers and judges. Among the problems cited as troubling current forensic programs are burn-out in overscheduled coaches and students, financial difficulties, and an unprofessional competitiveness that is leading to habits that have no place in the real world. She calls for a note of optimism based on the concern of former students for whom forensic activities have been an important part of their lives. (HTH)

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REFLECTIONS ON FORENSICS

GRACE WALSH

For years this 1974 Weaver Award Winner's name was synonymous with forensics in Wisconsin. Grace Walsh's students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire were viewed as formidable adversaries throughout the nation. Among the honors which she received are: 1980, Zeta Phi Eta Award Outstanding Communicator in Academia, selected by the Awards Committee of S.C.A.; 1977, Wisconsin Forensic Association Award for 50 Years of Distinguished Service; 1973, Golden Plaque on the 100th Anniversary of Interstate Oratory (25 Wisconsin State Champions and six first place winners of Interstate); 1973, Honorary Coach of the Wisconsin Senate; and 1969, U.S. Air Force Award for Coach of the Year.

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Sixty-nine years of involvement in speech activities and still enthusiastic--that means true dedication or derangement! How do you explain it? Do you have any secrets for success? Tell us how it feels to be retired from forensics, your editor asked.

I have not really retired. These activities provide a wonderful cushion between the end of an academic career and the senile state, and guarantee easy adjustment to new interests. My schedule is busier than ever. Locally I have been a lecturer at church and have trained many others to do likewise since my last term as Parish Council President expired. Captains and crusaders were trained this year to go door to door collecting for the American Cancer Society. That organized effort resulted in going over the goal of the city several thousands of dollars. Being city residential chairman was, for me, just another application of the problems of setting up tournaments and finding helpers. On the regional level, contests need judges. I do that. Banquets need after-dinner speakers. Women's clubs want book reviewers. Invitations to speak are frequent. Last year, all the major networks focused on the debates over Social Security at the White House Conference. As a Wisconsin delegate, I was glad I had previous experience in parliamentary debate. While Claude Pepper was the real hero of that conference, the rest of us learned more than we wanted to know about the spoken work in politics. The elections of 1982 were of special interest to me because I evaluated debates between candidates for high office in our state. Successful candidates, as well as a few who did not succeed, came to me for advice on persuasive speaking. Retired from forensics? Not me! Maybe I'm a forensics freak!

I think it all started because once I was a little girl with long black curls and and a pink serge dress with a skirt full of lace. Sister Verena picked me for my first public performance as the doll with a pain in her sawdust. What training in listening! I always knew what bells meant after that. Other childhood experiences put me before large audiences. I was the French orphan in a play at the New Richmond Opera House. When de Valera came

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through on the train on his fund raising tour for Ireland, I was lifted up to the back of the train to give him flowers. He picked me up and kissed me. That was true appreciation for my speech of presentation! I saw him years later at the Gresham Hotel in Dublin. As I was standing in line watching him go by, I thought to myself that I could still give him flowers, but that gaunt old man would never have strength enough to toss me in the air again.

Then came the period of elocution. What recitals! Mercedes was poisoned in a chariot race. Sally Rand could have been inspired by my Madame Butterfly performance--kimona, fan and all. My most dramatic scene, however, was from "Going of the White Swan." It involved a priest who perjured his soul when he bartered a keg of rum for a wife kidnapped by Indians. Her child had been bitten by a tiger and was about to die if the mother did not return. I knew no tiger-bitten children, no perjured priests, or no kidnapped wives. However, my teacher told me exactly how it went. A television re-run of those recitals would outrate any soap opera on the air today. But it would be unfair to ridicule that era without noting that some good came out of it. We had no microphones and never needed them because we were taught to use our voices. That training saved my life one day when I was driving home from a summer school of teaching at the University of Southern California. Two big cement mixers were blocking the road near a bridge construction. My car was heading for them at ninety miles an hour. When I called out that the car was out of control and that I could not stop, the construction worker with the flag heard me and signalled the mixer to back up just in time to let me through. I blessed Miss Melcher for teaching me to project and not to tolerate a sloppy speech. If anyone mispronounced a word, we had to start "The Gypsy Rover" all over again. By the time we gave that operetta, everyone in the cast knew every line. She was a slave driver and a perfectionist. Some of my squad, at times, thought a little of those traits rubbed off on me.

My father took a great interest in education. He always took time to answer my questions. He was a great teacher. He made learning fun and challenging. When he bought the new super-hytrodyne radio and the earphones, the election was the only program we listened to for days, Little Jack Little, notwithstanding. My father explained the electoral college to me as we listened to the 1924 deadlocked convention with Alabama always beginning the roll call casting its votes for Oscar W. Underwood. When Smith and McAdoo deadlocked the convention, John W. Davis came out the winner, and it was his success that led to the beginning of my interest in debate. Our subject was: Resolved that John W. Davis should be the next President which we debated before the high school assembly. Our teacher, Harvey Penney, in his ideas, was years ahead of most of the coaches in the area. He taught us how to examine evidence, how to debate extemporaneously, and how to clash directly with the arguments of our opponents. My partner, Don Olson, who later was coach at the University of Nebraska, was a Senior and I was the Freshman on that team. In that same year, Bruno Jacob of Chippewa Falls thought up the idea of a national organization called the National Forensic League. Harvey Penney was a member of the first board of directors and I was proud member 44 of that organization. When Mr. Penney went to Princeton for his Ph.D., he left three two-year seasoned veterans. In 1927, under the direction of our new coach, Roy Boyer, we won the state debate championship, the first winner of the Wisconsin High School Forensic

Association. The subject was Resolved: That Wisconsin Should Adopt the Initiative and the Referendum. The debates were held before the legislature in session. The Milwaukee Journal ran our pictures. Reporters from the Madison papers covered the debates, reviewing the arguments and evaluating the debaters. Our triumphant return home by train was a real celebration. The Omaha depot was draped in bunting. The engineer kept the whistle blowing all the way from Hudson. The Main street stores had signs printed "Welcome Home, Champs." To the city auditorium we were carried in the fire truck with the band marching beside us. That was a celebration!

During my Senior year, Miss Mandel, a superb teacher, helped me choose good literature. She taught me how to analyze the material, to look for the real meaning. District lines, in those days, were determined by the State Teacher College boundaries. Each league went to the district. One winner from each district went to the state contest in which nine speakers competed for places. What a contrast between the small number of participants speaking before a large audience in the state assembly and of one judge and a few interested teachers and parents. I doubt, however, that the multiple A's are as significant to the recipient as that single first. But winning is not the big thing. Maybe another day, another set of judges, and the champion of today may be at the bottom of the heap tomorrow. Early indoctrination into what competition is and how much subjectivity in judging will always continue no matter how many scientific scales of measurement are devised--these things must be impressed on participants. Then they can keep it all in perspective and remember the motto of the high school association--to pace each other on the road to excellence. This is what it is all about.

The college forensic years were important to me because Miss Nona McQuilkin helped me. She was from Superior. After an early fall elimination, she selected one orator upon whom she concentrated her efforts until the time of the state contest. Working with her was a great privilege; her method was an intense one-to-one tutorial approach. Twice a week evenings were spent at McQuilkins, reading, writing, talking, rewriting, arguing with Miss McQuilkin. The final speech became a part of one. Her efforts produced many excellent orations and orators. At the State Oratorical Contest held in Milwaukee, Andrew Weaver and Ralph Dennis; then Dean of the School of Speech at Northwestern, both gave me first place and it was that evening when Dean Dennis gave me a valuable scholarship with which it became possible for me to begin my graduate work before I went to my first teaching assginment.

Forty eight years of coaching followed, twelve of them in secondary schools. I have been asked to give suggestions to others to help them. I have no secret methods, but would like to stress the following:

1. The teacher must be well prepared. That teacher has to have high standards and must be willing to give unselfishly of time and energy to students. The teacher must be patient and encouraging and considerate of each individual.

2. The school system should be supportive of the program. One superb coach I know was so busy developing a squad that he wound up completely at odds with his administrator who didn't appreciate the coach at all because that coach did not justify the cost of the program to those who controlled the purse strings.

3. The community should see positive proof of the worth of the program. Appearances before all kinds of civic, service, and religious organizations help.

4. The press should publicize the program. Feature articles and pictures should be provided so that pride in the program is established.

5. Parents should be informed about school activities. They should be invited to participate in special events such as banquets.

6. College squads who have to fight the annual budget battle should watch campus elections and get supporters who will help to fight for the forensic share of the Student Activities budget.

7. Some kind of club organization is highly recommended. A speech fraternity with its publications, initiations, and conversation helps weld a feeling of togetherness.

8. All events on the annual schedule should challenge speakers to perform with those of comparable expertise. Some low keyed experience for beginners, some events for those of intermediate experience, and a challenge at the national level should provide a balanced schedule with opportunities for students at all levels of achievement in debate and/or individual events. Back in the 40's and 50's, Bradley and Eau Claire were among the few schools scheduling individual events, but now opportunities are many.

9. Other faculty members should constantly be informed about new events. Readers' Theatre, courses in rhetorical criticism, drama and interpretation, well taught, can contribute much to preparation for a forensic program. Names of students doing well in performance classes can be relayed to the Director of Forensics.

10. Freshman counselors can set up good questionnaires to screen out lists of incoming students who have previous experience. These names can be supplied to the Forensic Director who can write letters of welcome and make other efforts to interest potential squad members.

11. The emergence of organized area leagues like Twin City League has given many opportunities for experience and evaluation in the Minnesota, Northern Iowa, and Western Wisconsin schools. Other organized leagues are doing well in Southern Wisconsin.

12. Colleges and universities should sponsor clinics, festivals, tournaments, and summer programs. These activities attract students to return to the campus. Services of this kind help to improve the quality of speech, especially in areas where many teachers are insecure when they have forensic activities thrust upon them.

13. Invite community experts in areas related to the debate proposition to come in as guest lecturer.

14. Keep your alumni active in the program. Invite them in to judge at appropriate times.

15. The final feeling of the student should be his conviction that this experience has been worth the effort. He should have predominantly pleasant memories of forensics.

In spite of all these suggestions, I believe that forensic programs are heading for serious trouble and following are my charges against current forensic practices:

1. Coach "burn out." Have you noticed how few full professors are active in coaching these days? What used to be an honorable appointment is now often doughed off to assistants and instructors who are non-speech people whose chief concern is doing their own graduate work. Many are leaving this activity because the demands are not condusive to normal living. Tournaments beginning on Friday and running through Sunday make arrival home in the early morning on Monday a harrowing experience. Logging hundreds of miles week after week has become an unpleasant memory for me. One coach commented that when his little son started to cry when what he thought was a stranger was really his father at the breakfast,--that father decided to get a full time teaching appointment. Family friction often results from excessive absenteeism of a spouse. Is it any wonder that coaching today does not seem to be as attractive as it used to be?

2. Student burn out at both secondary and university levels is resulting from the fast pace of some programs. Some able high school student speakers never join a college squad and several I have known have dropped out because they had time for nothing else when they were in the program.

3. The atmosphere of camaraderie is fast disappearing. Instead of relaxed enjoyment, and even a game of bridge now and then among coaches who were friends, the coaches' time is spent trying to brief their teams on how to beat the next day's "squirrel case" or a bigger problem yet--what names of judges should be scratched from the "approved" list tomorrow.

4. Too many eager coaches think that getting one team to "make it out" at nationals is all there is to be concerned about. Such coaches wind up with just two debaters and that is no program.

5. Declining enrollments in schools have created economic stress and forensics is now one of the first activities cut. Active big programs of a few years ago are non-existent today in many places.

6. Enrollment projections have made tenure track positions unavailable. The lack of tenure track in a forensic program results in constantly shifting personnel and, consequently, makes it almost impossible to build a program with continuity.

7. The growing importance of the individual events with their qualifications for participation along with the constant pressure for more big and better debate tournaments have created big problems about what part of the budget should be spent on what part of the squad's activities. When different coaches with different ideas about where the program's money should be invested clash--that means war. That is why having co-directors of a program is not a good idea.

8. My most serious concern deals with the direction of debate. Winning debaters are developing habits which have little place in the real world. Debaters go so fast with their own lingo that only other debaters understand them. They throw long quotations at each other and call that debate. Counting the amount of evidence and not the quality of it accounts for some decisions. The judge gets so busy writing the total flow that he hardly has time to really listen to the sense of the argument. No matter what proposition is being debated, these so called successful teams outwit their opponents by outmaneuvering each other with absurd definitions of terms. Then they really wrap up their chances to win by springing a surprise case so unique and paralyzing that nobody ever thought of it all year. I heard a very important Washington lawyer who attended a final debate at Georgetown University recently comment: "Does anyone in the audience have any idea what these debaters are trying to read? If they are in pre-law, they better know now that they would be laughed out of court if they argued this way."

Forensics has survived many death predictions. I reread what H.L. Ewbank wrote about what's right with debate and it is as true today as it was years ago. I pick up the national magazines and time after time read names of people I know who were in debate in their college days. I go over to a little Wisconsin community annually and get inspired when I see what one energetic and talented teacher can do for hundreds of students she has trained in that forensic program. I recall an experiment conducted in a graduate class by a most inspiring teacher, Dr. Gladys Borchers. She asked how many first became interested in speech because they had been in a speech contest. A big majority of the hands went up. That should be reason enough to defend speech contests.

My most important reason for optimism is that there are in this country enough caring people who know what forensics has meant to them. Many of the debaters who used to compete during the twenty years of Nationals at West Point are constantly in the nation's limelight. I see them on nationwide television. Among them are presidents of universities, mayors of our cities, and many who argue cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. When some six hundred of them came to my retirement party, they spoke of what it all meant to them. Rod McPhee, head of Punohue school in Honolulu was the Master of Ceremonies. Robert O'Neill, President of the University of Wisconsin system, flew in on a charter after he delivered the University of Indiana Commencement address that afternoon to tell of his debate experience as a Harvard debater. Ruth Clusen, former national president of the League of Women Voters, regretted that she had to cancel at the last minute. Carolyn Welch came all the way from Japan. They came from coast to coast and from way around the world to tell about what forensics meant to them. They contributed over twenty six thousand dollars to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire for scholarships in my name.

Being a forensic coach has been a very worthwhile vocation for me. The mail is constantly arriving with invitations to former students' weddings. They send me pictures of their children and grandchildren. Sometimes a long distance call comes from a troubled one in tears about health or family problems. They are very dear to me. It is natural that forensic coaches have a closer relationship with their students than most teachers do. That's one of the best things about it. You may consider the price the coach pays too great. You may

think it isn't worth it. Many times, I've wondered, too. Then, I recall that Francis of Assisi said that it is in giving that we receive. When we choose this way of life, we give plenty but what we get back is too much to measure.